

News in brief

◆ **Russian President** Vladimir Putin yesterday put his signature to a law that fines internet users who search for web pages, books, artwork or music albums that authorities deem “extremist”. The law, slammed by critics as another dangerous attack on freedom of thought and expression in Russia, introduces fines of up to 5,000 rubles (\$64) on anyone found to have deliberately searched for, or gained access to, material listed as “extremist materials”. More than 5,000 entries are on the official list, including songs praising Ukraine, blog posts by feminist rock band Pussy Riot and websites critical of Putin.



Putin signs law that fines online searches for ‘extremist’ content

◆ **The opposition leader** in Pakistan’s parliament was among more than 100 people convicted yesterday over nationwide protests in support of Imran Khan in 2023, his party said. A statement from Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party (PTI) said six members of parliament, a senator, and a provincial MP, were given 10-year sentences, a week after several others were also convicted. Among them was Omar Ayub Khan, the opposition leader in the National Assembly, who did not attend the protests. He was convicted at an anti-terrorism court in the eastern city of Faisalabad of abetting violence and conspiring to incite riots and arson. “We are going to challenge this in the upper court,” PTI chairman Gohar Ali Khan told reporters. “Such verdicts are bad for democracy and the country altogether.”

Pakistan opposition leader given 10 years for Imran Khan protests

◆ **Lebanese President** Joseph Aoun said yesterday that his country was determined to disarm Hezbollah, a step it has come under heavy US pressure to take, with the Iran-backed group insisting that doing so would serve Israeli goals. Hezbollah and Israel recently fought an all-out war that left the militant group badly weakened, though it retains part of its arsenal. Israel has kept up its air strikes in Lebanon despite a November ceasefire, and has threatened to continue until the group has been disarmed. In a speech on Thursday, Aoun said Beirut was demanding “the extension of the Lebanese state’s authority over all its territory, the removal of weapons from all armed groups including Hezbollah and their handover to the Lebanese army”. He added it was every politician’s duty “to seize this historic opportunity and push without hesitation towards affirming the army and security forces’ monopoly on weapons over all Lebanese territory... in order to regain the world’s confidence”. Under the November ceasefire, Hezbollah was to withdraw its fighters north of the Litani river, about 30 kilometres (20 miles) from the Israeli border.

President says Lebanon determined to disarm Hezbollah



SPOTLIGHT

Lightning megaflash of 829 kilometres sets new world record



Picture for representation only

Geneva, Switzerland

A new world record for the longest distance lightning flash was declared on Thursday -- a megaflash that stretched for 829 kilometres (515 miles) across the United States. The huge flash occurred on October 22, 2017, from eastern Texas to near Kansas City, the World Meteorological Organization said. The United Nations’ WMO weather agency said the megaflash underlined the epic power of lightning -- and how flashes can pose dangers far from the original storm. The previous record, also

observed in the United States, happened on April 29, 2020 between Mississippi and Texas, with a lightning flash of 768 kilometres. It was certified as a record in 2022. Both the previous and new records have a margin of error of plus or minus eight kilometres. The 2017 storm produced several huge flashes. Three were analysed and were enough to formulate a ground-breaking definition of megaflash lightning. Going back and re-examining the data from the landmark storm led to the discovery of a hitherto overlooked megaflash that was bigger than the one in 2020.

Trump’s envoy arrives in Israel as Gaza criticism **mounts**

Israeli forces opened fire on a crowd attempting to block an aid convoy



An injured boy reacts as he sits on the ground by other men who were all wounded while previously queuing for aid, at Nasser Medical Complex in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip

● **Witkoff to discuss humanitarian aid and the “next steps”**

● **Israel is under mounting international pressure to agree a ceasefire**

AFP | Jerusalem, Undefined

US President Donald Trump’s Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff arrived in Israel yesterday to discuss ways to end the crisis in Gaza, where nearly 22 months of grinding war and dire shortages of food have drawn mounting international criticism. Gaza’s civil defence agency reported dozens of Palestinians killed late Wednesday when

Israeli forces opened fire on a crowd attempting to block an aid convoy -- the latest in a spate of near-daily incidents of desperate aid seekers being shot. The Israeli military confirmed having fired “warning shots” as Gazans gathered around aid trucks, but said it had no knowledge of casualties in the incident. An AFP correspondent saw the bullet-riddled corpses of Palestinians in Gaza’s Al-Shifa hospital. Jameel Ashour, who lost a relative in the shooting, told AFP at the overflowing morgue that Israeli troops opened fire after a crowd surged towards the convoy. “When people saw thieves stealing and dropping food, the hungry crowd rushed in hopes of getting some,” he said. With talks for a ceasefire and hostage release deal at an impasse, Witkoff met Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to dis-

cuss humanitarian aid and the “next steps” on Gaza. He may also visit a US-backed humanitarian group distributing food in Gaza, according to Israeli reports. Footage released by Netanyahu’s office showed the Israeli leader smiling warmly and greeting a cheery Witkoff in his office. Witkoff has been the top US representative in the indirect Israel-Hamas talks, but discussions broke down last week when Israel and the United States recalled their delegations from Doha. Israel is under mounting international pressure to agree a ceasefire and allow the world to flood a hungry Gaza with food, with Canada the latest Western country to announce plans to recognise a Palestinian state. Trump criticised Canada’s decision and, in a post on his Truth Social network, placed the blame for the ongoing conflict squarely



Last week more than 70 Israeli lawmakers, including some in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing coalition, passed a motion urging the government to impose sovereignty over the occupied West Bank.

on Hamas. “The fastest way to end the Humanitarian Crises in Gaza is for Hamas to SURRENDER AND RELEASE THE HOSTAGES!!!” he declared.

Germany says Israel ‘increasingly in the **minority**’ on Palestinian issue

AFP | Berlin, Germany

Germany’s foreign minister said yesterday that Israel was increasingly isolated diplomatically over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the push by some countries to recognise a Palestinian state. Johann Wadephul said in a statement before heading to Israel that the recent UN confer-

ence on a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- boycotted by the US and Israel -- showed that “Israel is finding itself increasingly in the minority”. Wadephul repeated Berlin’s position that “the recognition of a Palestinian state should come at the end of the process” of negotiations. He did however sharpen his

tone slightly by insisting that “this process must begin now” and that “Germany will also be forced to react to unilateral moves”. He said that airlifts -- which Germany will take part in in coming days -- were one way of delivering aid but that they “cannot replace” deliveries by land. “Only overland can aid reach the population in the necessary

quantities,” he said, adding that Germany was working to re-establish the land route “urgently”. Wadephul is expected to meet his Israeli counterpart Gideon Saar and President Isaac Herzog on the trip to Israel, as well as Netanyahu. He will also travel to the West Bank to meet Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas.